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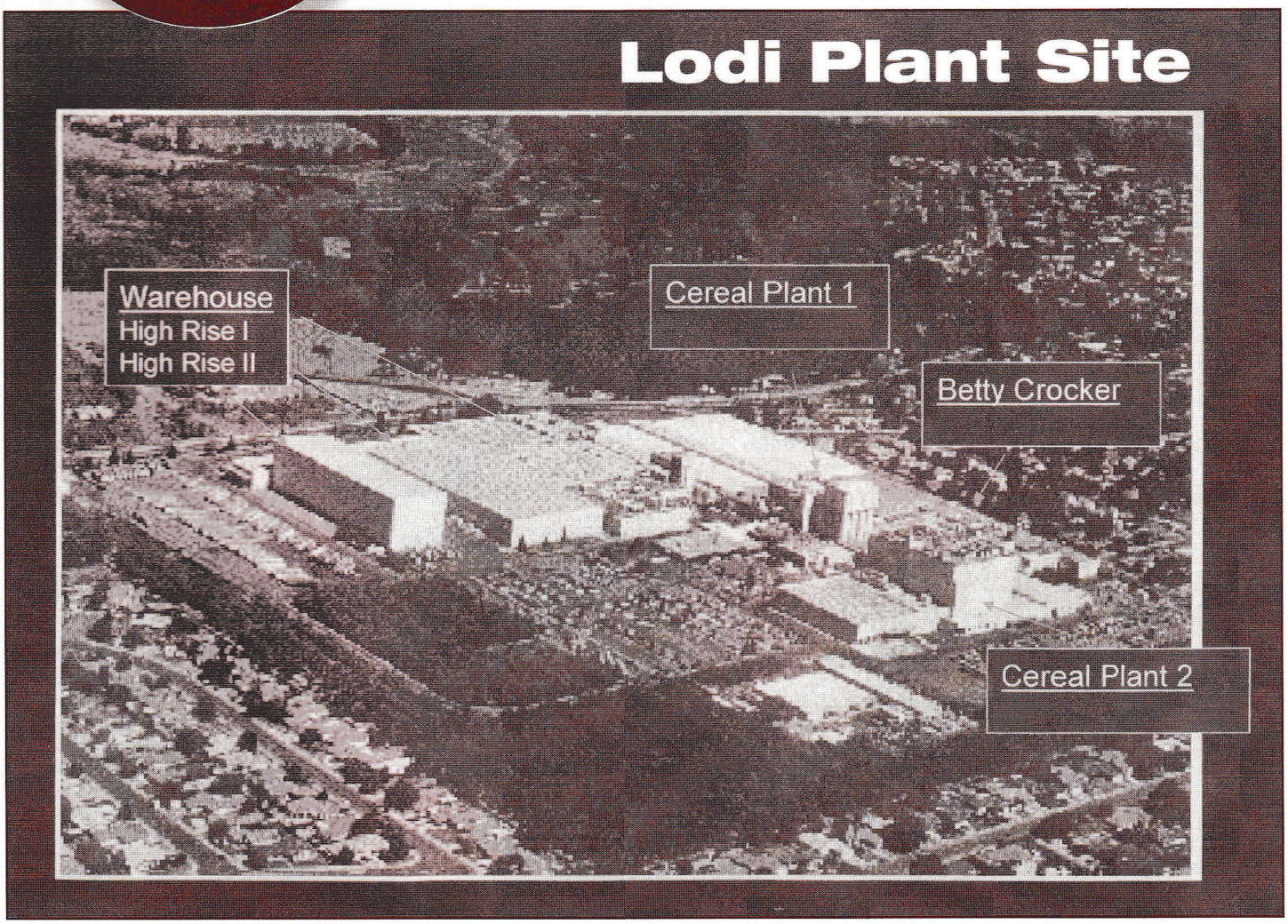
GENERAL MILLS

By Ralph Lea and Janice Roth

The first board meeting of General Mills was on June 22, 1928, in Minneapolis. Its roots extend back to 1866 when Cadwallader Washburn built his first flour mill near the Falls of St. Anthony on the banks of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis.

In 1874, Washburn built a second, even larger facility called the "A" mill. It was destroyed in a flour dust explosion. Four years later, he built an even better mill with revolutionary new machinery using automatic steel rollers that replaced the grinding



▲ *General Mills in Lodi California.*

▲ *1946 meeting with officials of General Mills, Inc. at the Hotel Lodi. (l to r): Lemoin Beckman, unknown, unknown, Robert Rinn, City Mayor, John F. Blakely, City Clerk, F.S. Van Arsdale, Secretary of the Chamber of Commerce, and E. G. Stuckenbruck, County Supervisor.*

stones. The new machinery produced flour that had a whiteness not before seen in flour and superior baking properties. After winning several awards, the company decided to name their flour "Gold Medal" which is still the No. 1 flour brand today.

Wheaties was discovered by accident in 1921 by a health clinician mixing bran gruel on a hot stove. George Cormack, head miller of Washburn Crosby Co., made a new cereal with bran. A contest was held and the name of Wheaties was chosen over Nutties and Wheat Flakes. In 1933 Wheaties sponsored the creation of hero "Jack Armstrong—All American Boy" airing on American radio. It also used key sports figures, such as Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, Jackie Robinson and others; in its advertisements and soon became "Wheaties, the Breakfast of Champions."

In 1937, Kix became the first puffed corn cereal on the market. Later the puffing gun was used to produce Cheerios and Trix.

Meanwhile, in the far west, Austin Sperry founded the original Sperry Mills in 1852. Sperry merged with General Mills on June 5, 1928, along with Red Star Milling Co. of Kansas, the Larrowe Milling Co. of Michigan, the Kell Group from the Southwest, the Rocky Mountain Elevator Co., the Royal Milling Co. and Kalispell Flour Mill, all of Montana.

The Betty Crocker name was used from the beginning of the company, but finally got a picture in 1936. Bisquick was already popular in the 1930's and by the 1960's, another big seller was the fortified cereal Total.

On March 28, 1946, plans were approved to locate a General Mills plant in Lodi. The Lodi site was selected for its economic advantages from a standpoint of freight rate and raw materials. Geographically the Lodi plant was situated to cater to the expanding markets in the west. Frank S. Van Arsdale was Secretary-Manager of the Lodi District Chamber of Commerce at the time.

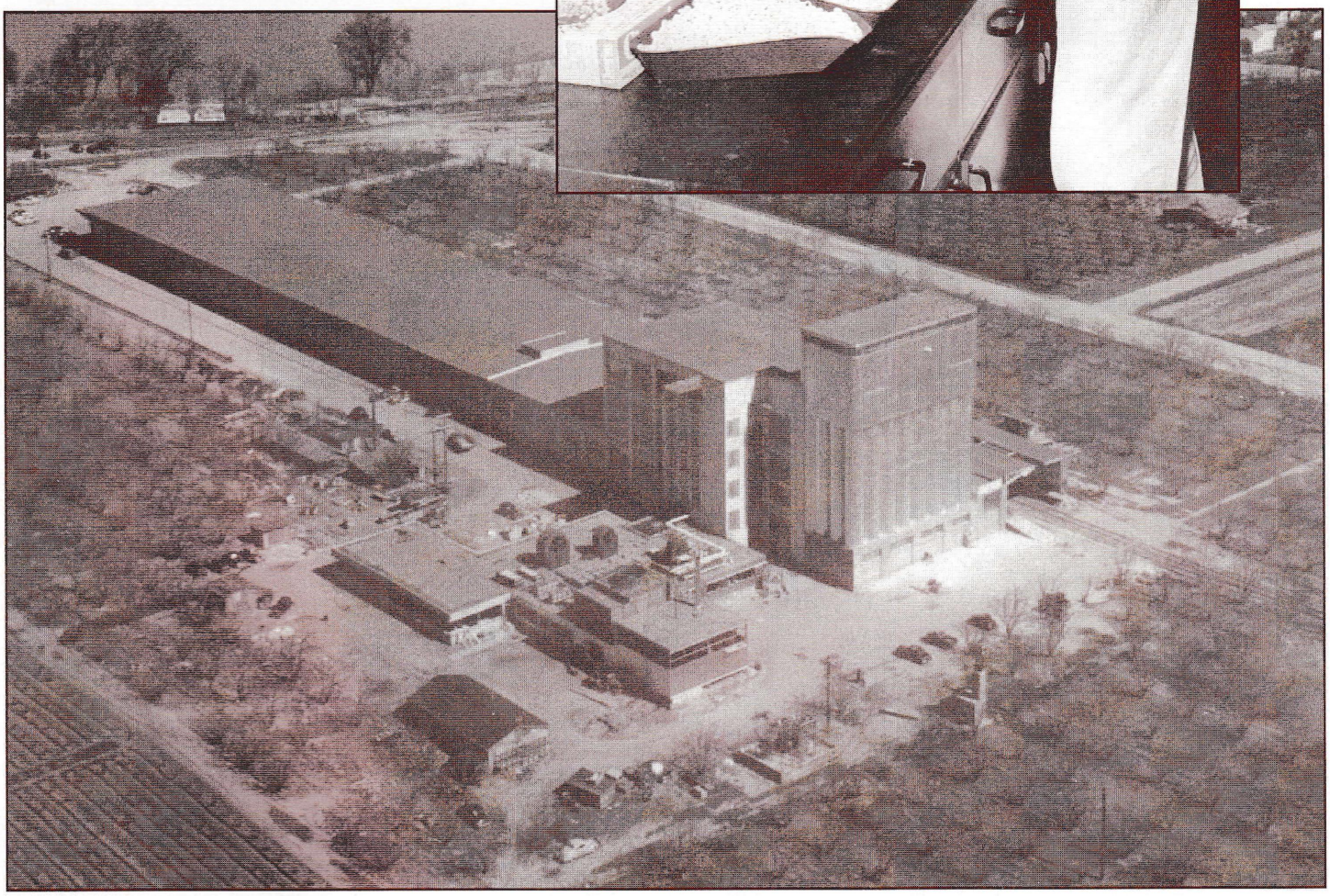
The plant site consisted of 20 acres of Ray Gerard's cherry orchard, with the plant to occupy ten acres. Construction on the Turner Road plant started on April 1, 1946. The site had mature cherry trees, and at least eight acres of trees were spared. Utah Construction was the prime contractor. Several houses were built along Mills Avenue by the Utah Construction Company about the same time. The historic Smith Property was just to the north and later became part of General Mills. The Smiths were owners of Lodi Lake.

Originally, the plant was to hire 150 employees to produce Bisquick, Wheaties, Kix, and Cheerios. There was a threat of an electrical power

shortage during the early days of the mill operation. The plant contained 107,000 square feet of floor space, a one-story warehouse 480 feet long and a four-story manufacturing unit. There were also 24 round steel bins—9 feet in diameter—holding 20,000 bushels of wheat and 30,000 cwt. of flour.

Opening April 1st after a $2,000,000 investment, Clarence Owston was in charge of the Lodi district sale staff of seventeen. Local headquarters area extended south to Bakersfield, the Oregon border to the north, east to Elko, Nevada and west to Tracy.

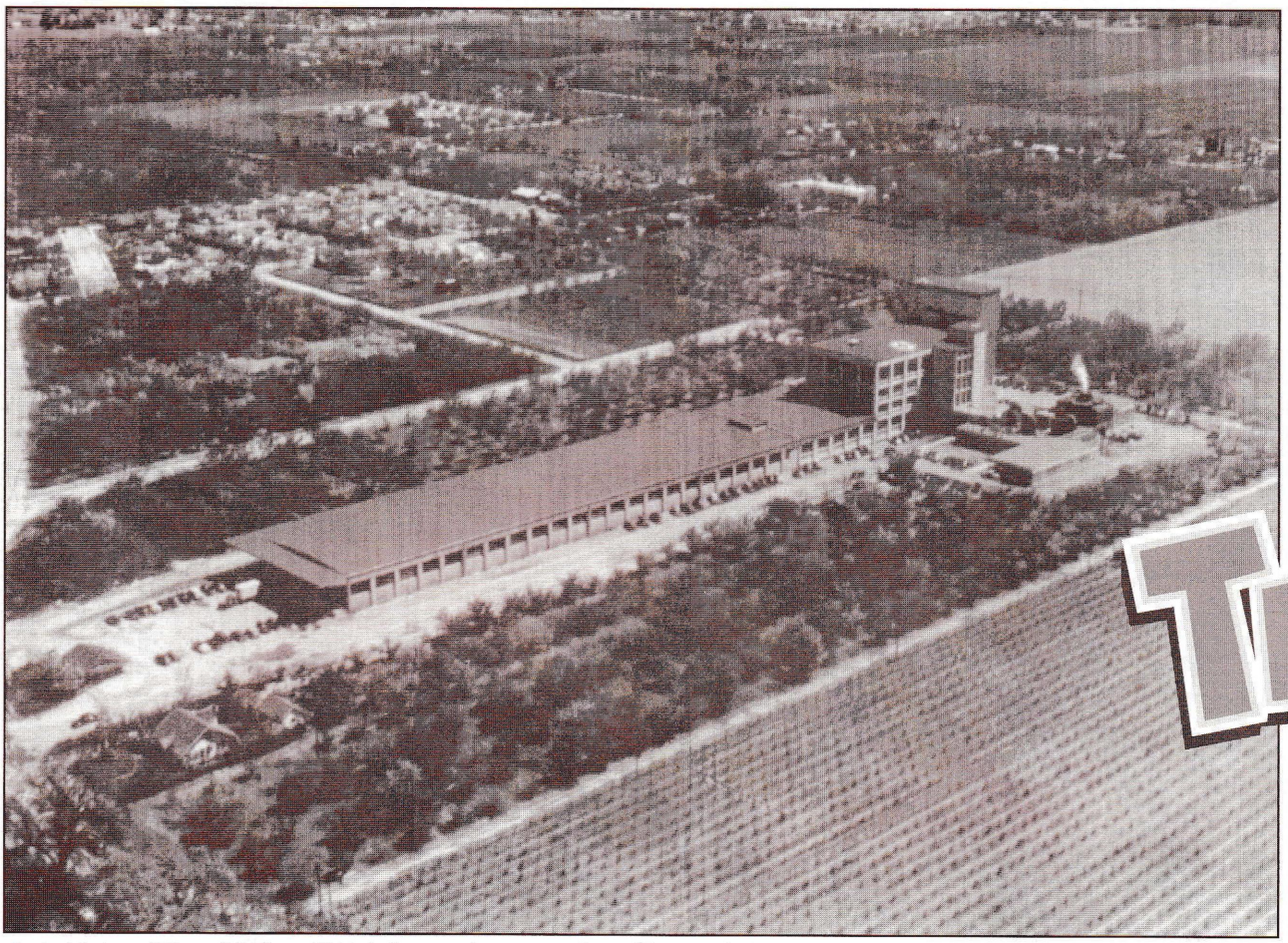
On March 19, 1948, General Mills' officials visited Lodi. They arrived by private plane and included J. S. Mitchell, Vice President of Grocery Sales; E. O.Boyer, President of the Sperry Division & Vice President of General Mills; Walter R. Berry, Vice President Grocery Products and G. P.



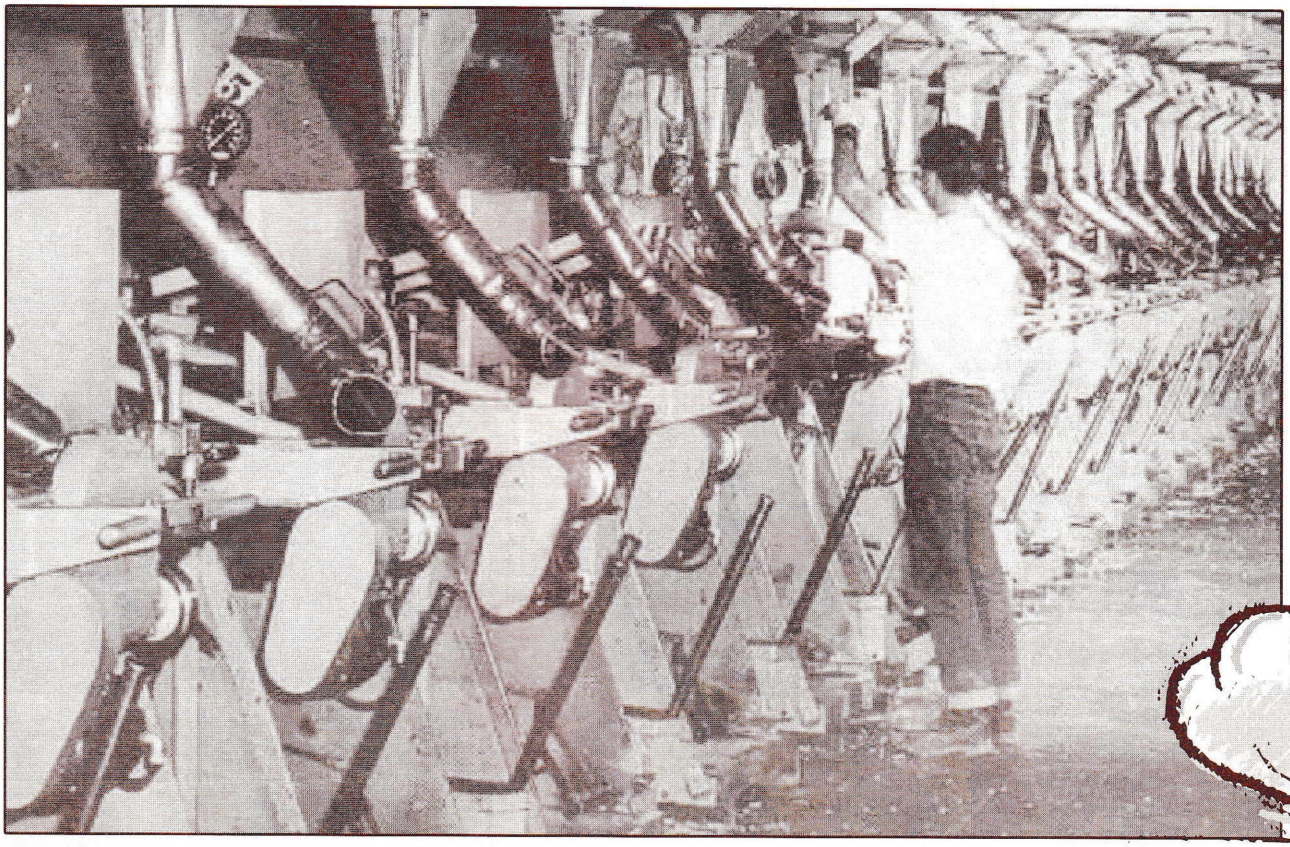
Lodi General Mills Plant, c.1949, located on Turner Road at Lodi Lake, looking northeast. General Mills began to build this plant on Turner Road in 1946. This is one of six General Mills package food operations across the country. Cereals such as Cheerios, Trix, Wheaties and Total are produced here as well as Bisquick, cake mixes, box frosting mixes, ready to spread frostings and fruit bars and fruit rollups. Since 1967, it has been the West Coast Distribution Center for all General Mills products. ▲

Courtesy the Bank of Stockton Historical Photograph Collection.

Inset shows a General Mills Quality Control employee, checking samples of products, notice the cherry orchard outside of the windows.



▲ *Aerial view of General Mills in 1948, looking southeast. Note that Holly Street had just begun.*



▲ *Puffing (batch) guns in General Mills of Lodi, used in production of Cheerios and Kix cereals.*

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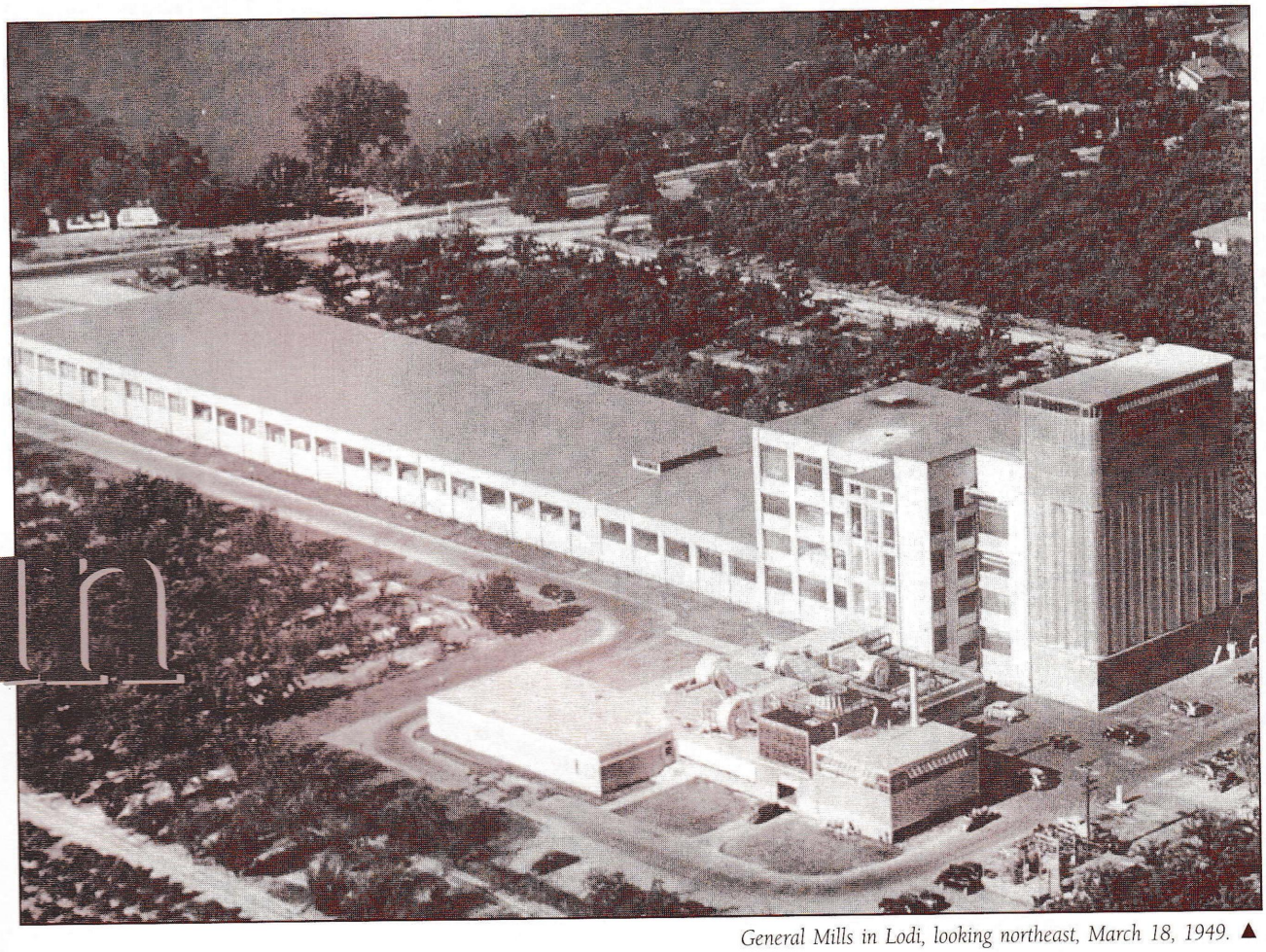
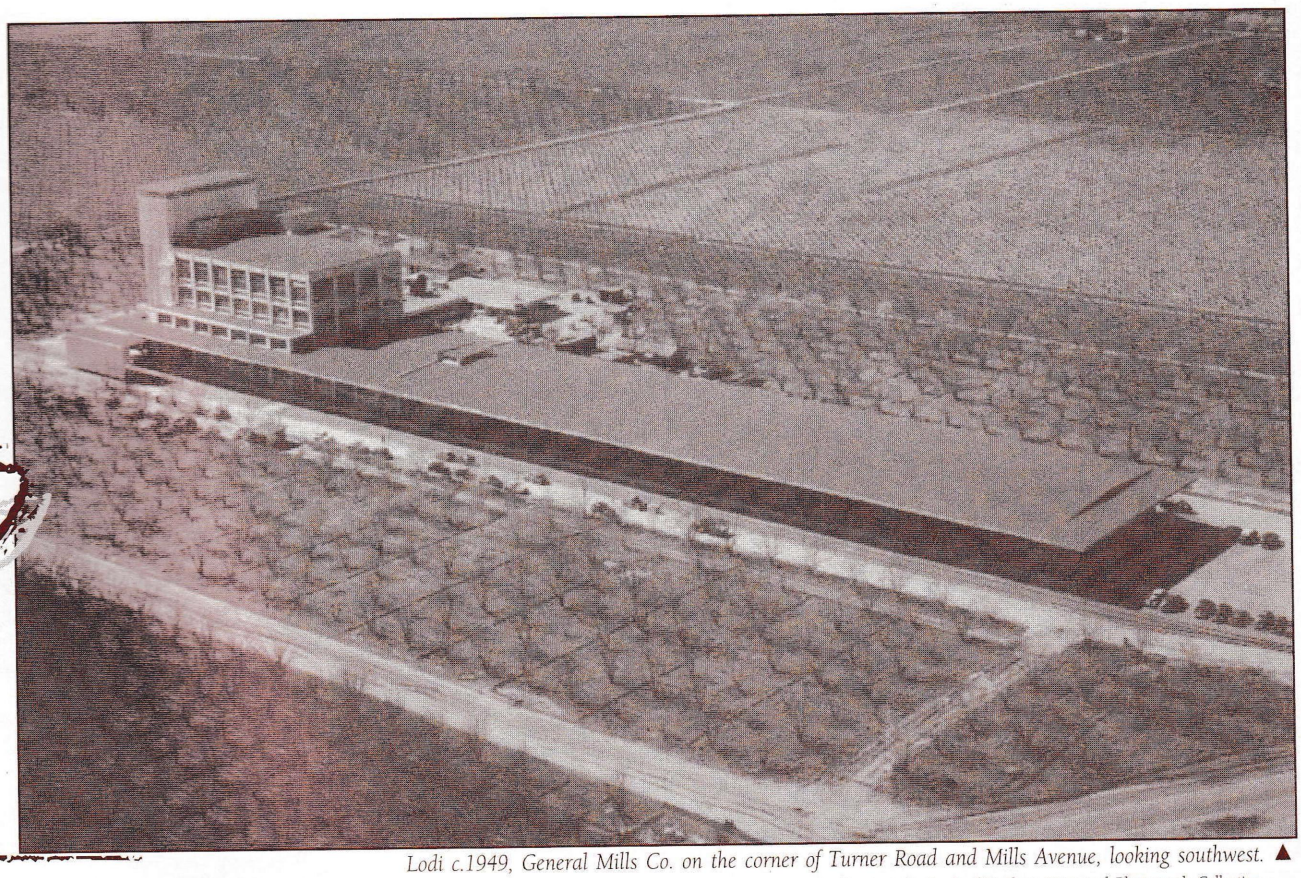
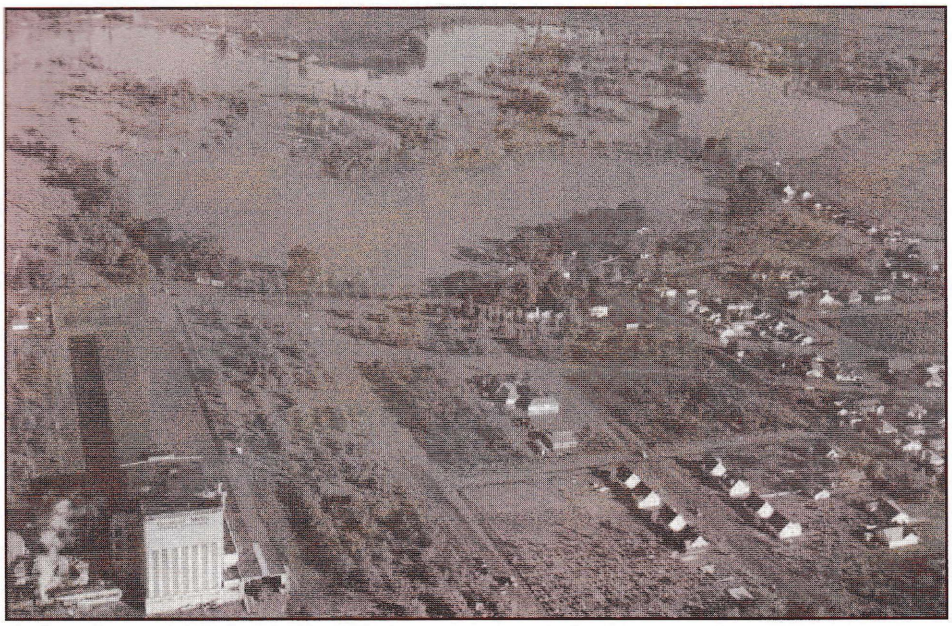


General Mills in Lodi, looking northeast, March 18, 1949. ▲



Lodi c.1949, General Mills Co. on the corner of Turner Road and Mills Avenue, looking southwest. ▲

Courtesy the Bank of Stockton Historical Photograph Collection.



▲ *Lodi, c.1950, Lodi Lake Flooding, General Mills Plant at left, looking north.*
Courtesy the Bank of Stockton Historical Photograph Collection.

Kennedy, Vice President of General Flour Operations.

The Lodi unit became the sixth major production plant in the Sperry Division. Other plants in the Sperry division included Oakland, Vallejo, Los Angeles all in California, Tacoma and Spokane in Washington and Ogden in Utah. On April 15, 1948, the plant in Lodi loaded its first car of Cheerios for market. Virgil Dunkley was plant manager in Lodi at the opening of the plant.

General Mills held an Open House on June 5, 1948, from 9:30-4:30 PM. E. O. Boyer, Sperry Division President; Harry A. Bullis, Chairman of the Board of General Mills; Walter R. Barry, Vice President; Samuel C. Cale, Vice President and Henry S. Crosby, Vice President were among the visiting dignitaries.

Busses arrived at the plant every two hours and provided transportation for several thousand persons to visit the new plant. 175 were initially employed a the Lodi plant. At least one production line was to be open for "Open House." A cocktail party at Towne's corner and a dinner at Hotel Lodi for 300 concluded the festivities. Silvo's Orchestra provided music for the gala occasion.

Approximately 5 million cases of packaged foods were shipped from General Mills' West Coast Plants each year to the 10 western states, Hawaii and the Orient and included products such as Kix, Wheaties, Cheerios, Softasilk, Bisquick, Betty Crocker Cereal Trays, Sperry Pancake & Waffle Mix, Sperry Wheat Hearts, Sperry Yellow Corn Meal and Sperry White Corn Meal.

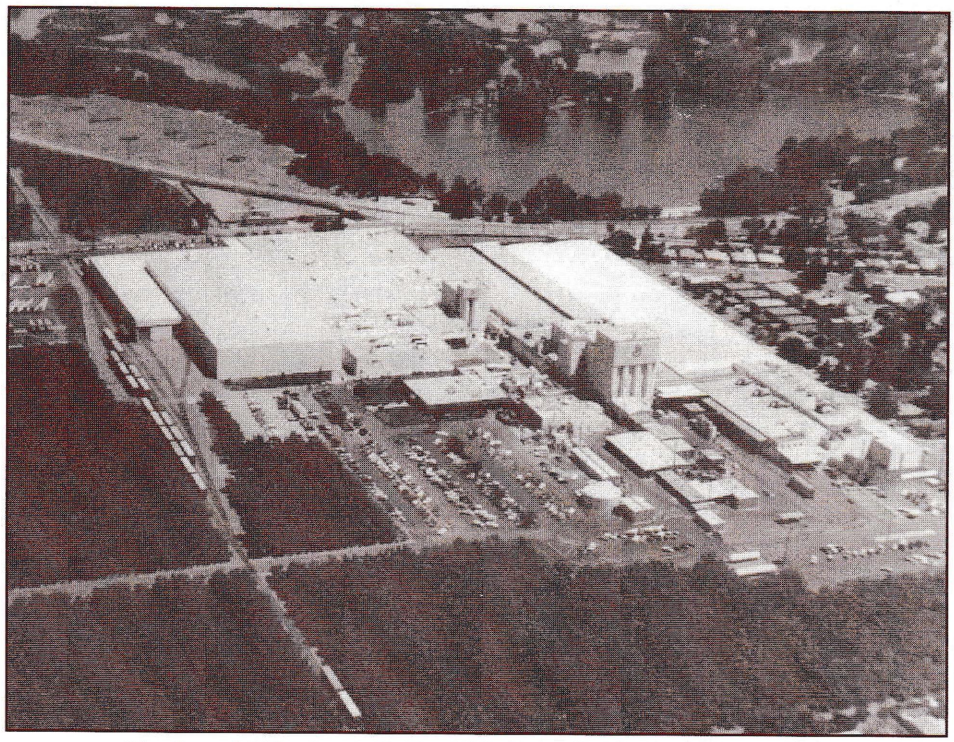
▲ *Lodi c.1961, General Mills, looking south.*

Courtesy the Bank of Stockton Historical Photograph Collection.

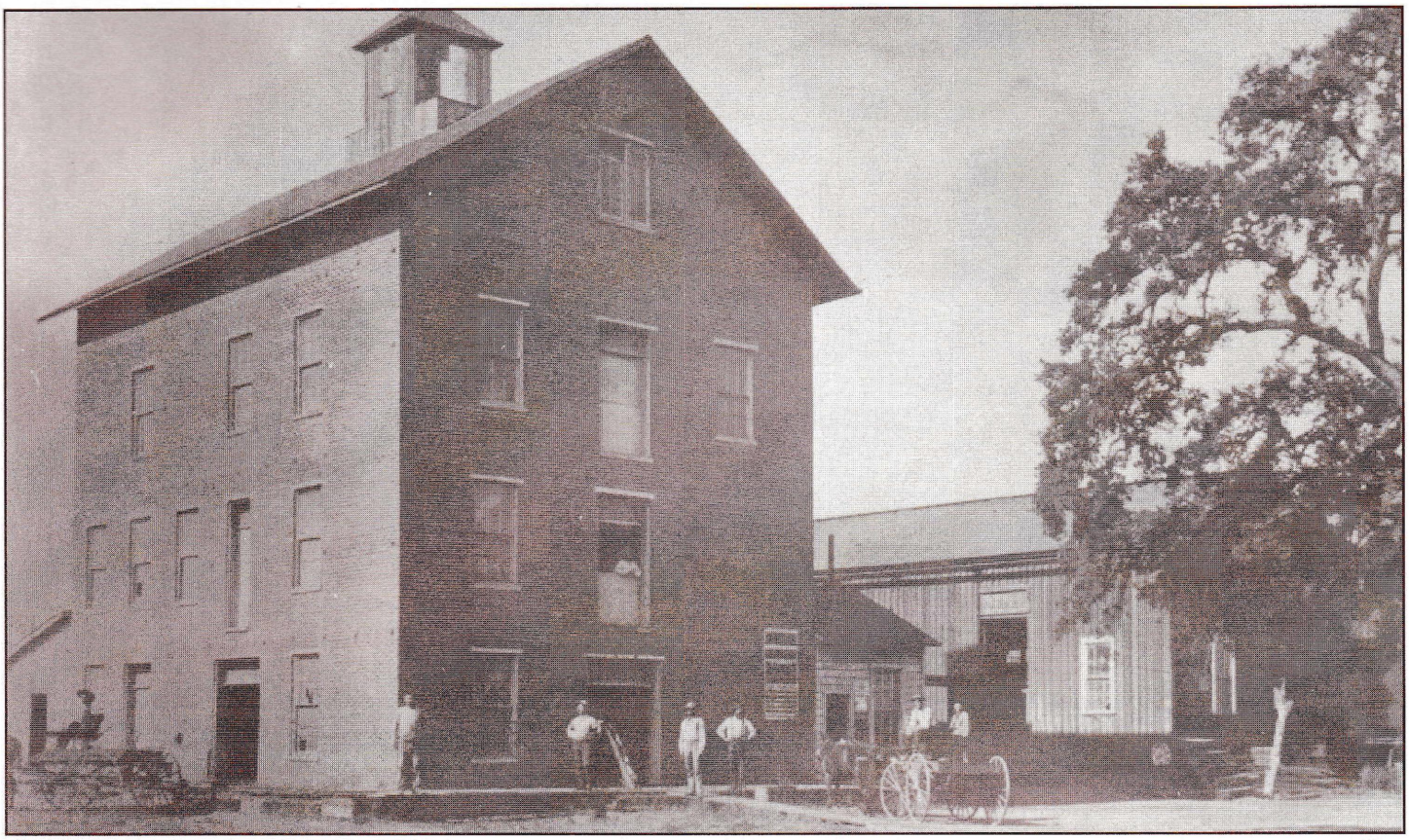
Open House, June 1948 with visiting General Mills officials and Lodi hosts: Lemoin Beckman, far left; Mayor Robert Rinn, third from left, and John Blakely, City Clerk, third from right. ▲

Betty Crocker ads in the local newspaper featured a General Mills Representative at the Tokay Food Market located at 25 S. School Street on Saturday, March 19. Two 8-ounce boxes of Wheaties sold for 25 cents and the same for two packages of Kix that held box top that could be mailed in along with 15 cents for a Lone Ranger ring.

With the purchase of the almond orchard to the north of Turner Road and the vines and almond trees to the west of the early site the Lodi plant grew to a total of 78 acres with 1 million square feet under roof. At one time it employed over 950 persons making it the largest non government employer in Lodi. It serviced 11 western states plus Hawaii. The Lodi mill operated two puff systems and four packaging systems for Cheerios, Lucky Charms and Organic.



The General Mills plant in Lodi, c. 1984, Turner Road at Mills Avenue, looking north. ▲
Courtesy the Bank of Stockton Historical Photograph Collection.



▲ *In 1876, the same year that the farmers prevailed over the railroad, they built this flour mill on north Main Street. The Lodi Mill and Warehouse erected the mill at a cost of $30,000. They had the capacity of 200 barrels of flour in twenty-four hours. The brick building contained four run of stone and a barley mill, powered by a steam engine. In 1879 it was operated by Ralph Ellis of Napa, who erected a warehouse with a storage capacity of 4,000 tons.*

Courtesy the Bank of Stockton Historical Photograph Collection.

In 1957, Betty Crocker cereal Plant II had one sprout system, four more packaging systems and produced Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Golden Grahams and Cinnamon Minis. The Lodi plant manufactured 25 million cases and distributed 35 million cases of product per year.

Nine batch mix systems, seven packaging systems were in used to produce mixes for cakes, cookies, brownies, muffins and pancakes plus hamburger helper, tuna helper, chicken helper and potatoes.

The General Mills Christmas Star was installed in 1955. It was built by Roy Metcalf, long-time employee, and wired by Cladie Lee. The 40-watt bulbs have been replaced by neon lights and in 1995 changed to a blue neon star.

There are a thousand stories about the Lodi General Mills Plant from their many employees. However, one that is difficult to believe is that by planting Cheerios one can grow doughnuts.

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References

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